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Landmarks for Sleepwalkers

Isaac S. Howell

Washington University in St Louis

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Isaac Howell
Landmarks for Sleepwalkers
May 1st, 2015

Studio Art and Comparative Arts Major

Washington University in St. Louis
College of Art
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts

Abstract:

In my recent work I have been interested in thinking about notions of instability. In order to explore these notions, in this paper I will like to explore the relevance of postmodern literary theory and the color black in my work, as well as think about the importance of the grid as a tool for organization and ontological delineation.

I will be examining writing by Alain Robbe-Grillet, as well as art work by Mark Manders, Giorgio de Chirico, Kay Sage, and Ad Reinhardt.

Landmarks for Sleepwalkers

I am interested in the gray area between reason and unreason. I have in the past year developed a phenomenological approach to art making where, like a detective in a detective novel that searches for clues, I look for unexpected marks, surfaces, and textures. This interest has led me to explore less traditional painting and image-making techniques, such as collaging monotypes, applying soot, and power-washing acrylic paint to eventually compose an image that becomes the resolution to my investigation.

With my second major in Comparative Arts, I have recently been greatly influenced by the nouveau roman and postmodernist writers Alain Robbe-Grillet, for his re-examination of the relationships between life and fiction through ontological and epistemological destabilization within narrative construction. In the fine arts I have been looking at Mark Manders, Giorgio de Chirico, and Kay Sage for their collective interests in the uncanny.

Because of my theoretic interests in instability, I will like to explore the relevance of postmodern literary theory and the color black in my work, as well as think about the importance of the grid a tool for organization and ontological delineation. Imagistically I am more attracted to metaphysical surrealist imagery, although I believe that my interests in materiality lead me to often work more in an impressionistic manner.

An interest in Postmodernist Thought

Alain Robbe-Grillet, who spearheaded the nouveau-roman literary movement, would argue that any human experience could only be understood as subjective and ultimately fictional. Ironically the objective 'truth' can only be

established within works of fiction. Ontologically and epistemologically speaking the existence of something within a work of art (whether literature, music, or fine arts) can only be understood within the ontological frame of that artwork. For example in my fictional novel, a child with curls like a Bernese mountain dog is sailing a boat. In the next line, the child is now sailing on a boat with his Bernese mountain dog. The fluidity in which a description of a child's hair (a signifier) can become an actual creature (something signified) is only possible because the novel's ontological frame allows any invented scenario to function without questioning – that is to say that the traditional epistemological systems through which things are understood become unstable within these frameworks.

Michel Foucault in his preface to *The Order of Things*, references a Chinese Encyclopedia from a Borges short story where animals are categorized in a non-traditional taxonomy, with “animals belonging to the Emperor,” “embalmed,” or “tame” placed highest in the hierarchy and “stray dogs,” and “frenzied” lower. Foucault explains the humor and wonder in Borges's stories stem from the “exotic charm of another system of thought, [which] is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.” (Foucault, xv) The stylistic appeal of postmodern literature and thought comes from the frustration of trying to understand something that is almost familiar; and this *almostness* challenges accepted truths and chronologies, as well as question standardized methods of thinking.

Dutch Sculptor Mark Manders is perhaps most emblematic of this Foucauldian critique of Borges's proto-postmodernist thinking. Manders refers

to his piece, *A Place Where My Thoughts Are Frozen Together*, to speak of the development of the modern cup:

“The first cups were human hands; folded together you could take the water with your two hands out of the river. The next steps were things like hollow pieces of wood or things with folded leaves, and so on. The last beautiful moment in the history of the cup was when it was given an ear. After that, nothing really interesting happened with cups, just small variations. Many generations worked on it, and now you can say that the cup is finished in terms of evolution” (Manders, website).



Manders *A Place Where My Thoughts Are Frozen Together*

The humor in Manders's piece arrives from the realization that there must exist an evolutionary history even for banal quotidian objects like cups. Manders, however, evolves the cup one further step in *a Place Where My Thoughts Are*

Frozen Together, not formally, but by reassigning its functionality. With his arrangement of the femur and the cup suspending a sugar cube in the air, the two seemingly unrelated object suddenly become analogous. Associations between the lesser trochanter of the femur and the cup handle become suddenly obvious in their similarly extended curvatures. While the femur remains organic¹ and the cup man made, with the accomplishment suspending the cube, the objects suddenly seem to have been made specifically for the purpose of accomplishing this specific task. It is Manders's epistemological reassignment of the seemingly unrelated objects that makes his work so successful; without the sugar cube, the bone and cup would cease to logically function in the *common locus* where they have been placed.

Metaphysical and Surrealist Imagery

Brain McHale in his article *What Was Postmodernism* compares Modernist and Postmodernist literature. He writes, "Modernist fiction was preoccupied with *what we know* and *how we know it*... it asked *epistemological questions*. Postmodernist fiction, by contrast, explored *ontological* questions – questions of *being* rather than *knowing*" (McHale, online). However, McHale clarifies that literature can never be completely Modernist or Postmodernist in nature; while some novels may question epistemological questions over ontological ones or visa versa, both often interact fluidly between one another. As mentioned previously, while I am conceptually interested in postmodern literary theory, I am interested in metaphysical and surrealist imagery by artists like painters

¹ To clarify, the femur is made of painted epoxy, but here I mean organic in the sense

Giorgio de Chirico and Kay Sage because of their ability to depict uncanny landscapes that seem to either leap between or exist in uncertain territories of being; or in McHalian terms, I believe de Chirico and Sage's work oscillate between points of ontological and epistemological certainty which challenge their viewership.

De Chirico's paintings are weird. For an example, his painting *Sole sul cavaletto* (*Sun on the Easel*) from 1973 depicts a room with a large window opening to a twilight sky, with darkened silhouettes of the moon and the sun. The silhouettes are connected by electrical chords that lead from the sky, to the room, to the lit versions of themselves. The sun and moon assume human qualities within this room – or perhaps theatre stage. The sun seems to be returning to the easel after a day's work in the sky, whereas the moon lazes on the ground next to an armchair before finally return to the sky for the night; the chords function as pathways through which the sun and moon travel from room to sky.



De Chirico, *Sole sul Cavaletto*

In de Chirico's *Il figliuol prodigo* (*The Prodigal Son*), 1975, a paternal marble sculpture descends from his base to hold his mannequin son. In this painting, de

Chirico maintains a strategy that can also be seen in *Sole sul cavaletto* where he humanizes non-sentient subjects to engage in somewhat banal but characteristically human actions. The forward tilting of the heads, as well as the father's hand placed on the mannequin's neck base represents an extremely personal and familiar father-son interaction. The three small figures in the background cause an illusion of a perspectival hyperextension that is incongruous to the lengths of the sculpture and building's shadows. The spatial confusion then denotes a vastness of the space, and thus simultaneously a silence through its emptiness. The visible quiet of the space as well as the stillness of the two figures emphasizes the beautiful intimacy of the two figures; and it is exactly this incredible intimacy that gives the sculptural figures their human-ness.



De Chirico, *The Prodigal Son*

Yet, while de Chirico is able to give life anything from a moon to a mannequin, he strategically paints reminders that return the subjects to their epistemologically stable origins. The marble base right of the paternal sculpture

in *The Prodigal Son* remind the viewer that father is actually a monumental sculpture exhibited outside of a building. The silhouettes in the sky of *Sun on the Easel* remind the viewers that the sun and moon belong in the sky to illuminate the earth from above. To juxtapose these origins to the subjects' arcane sentience highlights the epistemological confusion that exists between how we normally understand these subjects' functions, and how they exist within the paintings' ontology. These instances of metaphysical complications make de Chirico's paintings engaging.

Furthermore, de Chirico's paintings embody the Foucauldian "charm of another system of thought." Whether it is the idea of the sun returning home after it has finishing shining, or the thought of a mannequin maturing into a marble sculpture, de Chirico's ideas are often laugh out loud funny exactly because of their strangeness.

Kay Sage's paintings maintain the same dream-like quality and quietude of de Chirico's yet are more psychological in their appearance because they lack recognizable representational imagery. The cloaked edifice in Sage's *I Saw Three Cities* is almost recognizable as figurative form, perhaps referring to Nike of Somafrace; however, as far as what is visible, the structure that is cloaked by the cloth is not figural, but a vertical orange pole. The outward dragging of the cloth to the left side of the painting suggest that perhaps there is wind blowing, yet the rigid geometric structures in the otherwise sparse horizon, along with the muted color palette negate any sense of movement in the cloth. Despite Sage's similarities to de Chirico – and Sage was an astute student of de Chirico's paintings – her response to de Chirico's metaphysical paintings were different

from most painters influenced by the Italian. As Judith Suther writes in *A House of Her Own: Kay Sage, Solitary Surrealist*:

“Whereas [others] were fascinated by De Chirico’s interest in tapping the irrational by means of pictorial representations of the unconscious, seeing the Italian’s hypothesis as an endorsement of their own experiments, Sage’s interests was less theoretical. It was the images themselves that fired her imagination, not any particular ideas behind the images. Her visceral response to De Chirico is consistent with the way she worked as she evolved a personal imagery. For her, theory had nothing to do with making a picture” (Suther, 63).



Sage, I Saw Three Cities

When placing my own work in relation to the surrealist painters, I think that the methodology through which I work is more in line to Sage’s method of image making than de Chirico. While I am sincerely excited by the kind of theory which de Chirico was engaged with, I do see that my work from the past year is more formally engaged. Because of my phenomenological interests with mark

making and material exploration, I often work impressionistically until I find an unusual mark that I can then create an image out of.

For an example, in my piece *The First Departure*, after reading an interview with Katharina Grosse I became interested in thinking about spray paint as a light source. I would spray paint over bent wires onto paper, with the spray painted image becoming a negative of the shadow of the wire. I then intuitively became interested in collaging the painted pieces of paper together so that the lines of the images connected together. I then pasted the paper over a painting that I had been simultaneously working on that represented my dislocated shoulder. The collage work became representative of the scrambling of my nerves and metal state at the point of dislocation, meanwhile formally working to establish a horizon line in the image. I had completed the painting by locating the painting in an isolated theatre-like stage, a setting that is common in de Chirico's paintings.

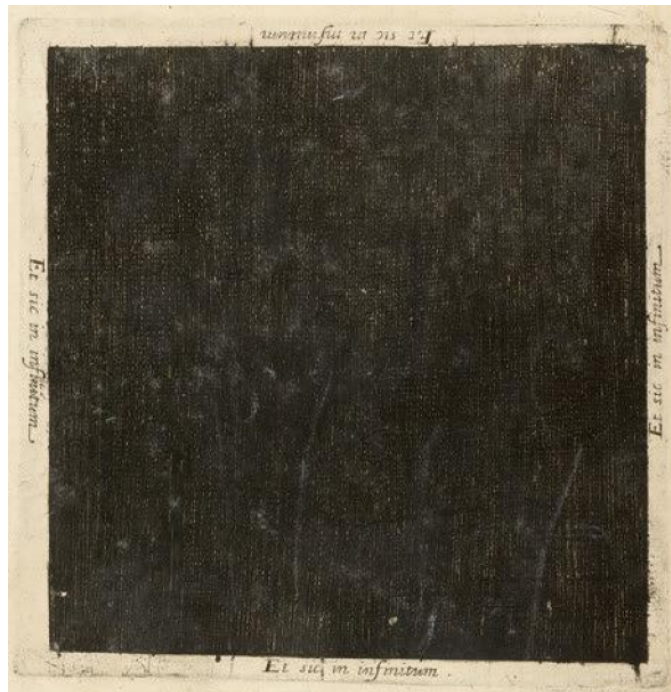


Howell, *The First Departure*

I was interested the way that at the moment of my dislocation my shoulder had transformed from a familiar part of my body to an unfamiliar

object that hanged on my side. While my arm represented a paradoxical singularity of being still part of my body, yet unfamiliar – something that was part of my self, yet simultaneously an other – the ideas that went into the painting do not have the sophisticated humor and weirdness that de Chirico has captured in his paintings. Yet, compositionally I was often referring to de Chirico, and perhaps my attempts to represent my arm as an object can be thought as a reversal of de Chirico's strategy to animate non-sentient subjects.

Importance of Black and Grids



Fludd's Black Square

In Robert Fludd's *The Metaphysical, Physical, & Technical History of the Two Worlds, the Major as well as the Minor*, Fludd includes one of the first depiction of what he believed to have existed prior to the big bang; a black square with the

words *Et sic in infinitum*² labeling all four sides. Eugene Thacker in Mute Magazine writes of how black is the only color, perhaps besides white, with the possibility of simultaneously representing everything and nothing:

“ a colour that either negates or consumes all colours. And we get a square that is not really a square, a box meant to indicate boundlessness. For the image to work within the context of Fludd’s cosmology, the viewer must *not* see the image for what it is – a black square. The viewer must understand the square as formlessness, and the black inside as neither a fullness nor an emptiness” (Thacker, online)

Black exists in a paradoxical singularity where it maintains the simultaneous possibility of representing a void or a complete amalgamation of all colors. It is a point where two opposing poles become visible at once, a bridge that cyclically connects a seemingly linear spectrum. The two-ness in its ability to signify, compounded in its singularity of existing as one shade places the color black in an epistemological gray-space.

Ad Reinhardt, as influential as his work has been to developing my current practice, has been a vital artist to work myself against. Whilst my interests lie in the unstable signification of black, Reinhardt – perhaps the most famous user of black in 20th century painting - saw the color as a tool for creating paintings that refused to signify anything besides the fact that they were paintings. Reinhardt throughout his career pushed to reject Duchampian modes of thinking, striving to paint paintings that could only be understood as ultimate

² “And so on”

art pieces about painting. A 1991 publication on Reinhardt by the Museum of Modern Art explains his no-frills philosophy of art making:

“ Reinhardt’s ‘art-as-art’ approach is different from Joseph Kosuth’s ‘art-as-idea-as-idea’...Reinhardt was vehemently against the paterfamilias of [the Minimalist and Conceptual] movements...(you have to choose between Duchamp and Mondrian), and indeed he found the whole Duchampian slogan for filling the gap ‘between art and life’ as repulsive as the hybridization between the individual arts” (MoMA, 13).

Thus for Reinhardt the employment of the modular grid, a mathematically perfect grid, was absolutely necessary. It solved the problem of compositional arbitrariness, “the subjective, the angst, the particular, the natural, the undetermined, the relative” – the significance of the specifically modular grid is that is structurally and compositionally resolved upon its presentation; “Thus there is no struggle to achieve it; it is not a reward” (MoMA, 19). For Mondrian and Rodchenko, the grid was an important tool to act against cubism’s “*composing, the putting together, the adjusting of heterogeneous fragments into a reconstituted formal organic unity,*” and following the grid’s historical significance, Reinhardt’s employment of the grid was necessary in making the painting have an immediate resolve; this formal construction was essential for Reinhardt to maintain his art-as-art stance (MoMA 19).

Yet despite Reinhardt’s insistence on making art solely about art, the use of black was a decorative compromise that he needed to make in order to engage the viewer with his artwork:

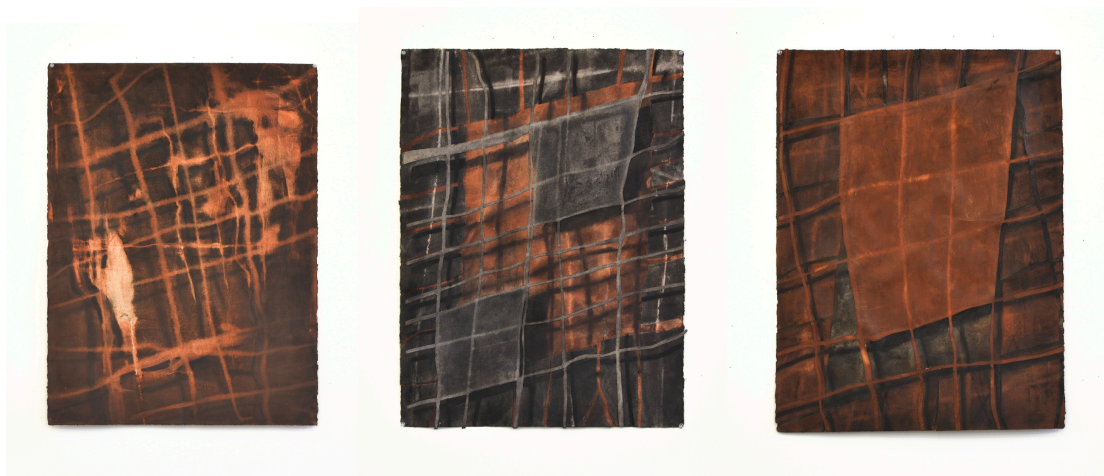
“It took him a long time to understand that he would have to transform his auditor, to alter the phenomenological conditions of the perceptibility of art in such a way that the beholder, at least if he or she were willing to take it even mildly seriously would have to renounce completely any usual expectation. The first step in this direction (to make subliminality visible is the equalization of values and the use of monotone)” (MoMA 19)



Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting*

MoMA's catalogue text then continues to relate Reinhardt's work to the Polish constructivist painter Władysław Strzemiński whose “entire program was, in fact, almost that of Reinhardt,” except his use of white on white instead of black on black was too violent (MoMA 19). Reinhardt knew that a simple grid painting would be too uninteresting and un-engaging with viewers, and using slightly varying hues of black was the ultimate solution to create a painting that contradicted expectations of viewership.

Rosalind Krauss explains in *Grids* that the grid inevitably presents the work of art as “a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from any infinitely larger fabric,” which thus functions to “separate the work of art from the world, from ambient space from other object” (Krauss 60-61). In this sense, the grid is functioning to delineate the ontology of the real world and the interior of the painting; this read of Reinhardt’s grid would then successfully reinforce his intent to use the grid as a signifier that located the painting as a painting.



Howell's Grids on paper

With the introduction of the grid on my work on paper, I was thinking about this organizational element of the grid in relation to my ongoing interests in stability. If the modular grid signifies an immediate resolution, it is also the most easily de-stabilized formal structure; I was asking myself questions such as what happens when the grid becomes non-modular? What would it mean to fragment the grid and reorganize it through collage? What if you saw the edge of this infinite fabric? What would drawing a shadow under the grid do to the grid’s property as a locator of the surface of the artwork? I personally enjoy the Sisyphean nature of art making, a task with no clear reachable end, and I think by asking these questions I was attempting to undermine Reinhardt’s idea that

an ultimate art piece could be painted. I wanted to try and de-stabilize the most stable formal structure in art whilst keeping it still recognizable as a grid.

I now question if Reinhardt was ever successful in making the ultimate art work as he claims to have with the black paintings; the task of making a painting that signified nothing but itself seems like a postmodern exercise in visual semantics, yet can understand the impossible difficulty of that task. Reinhardt's use of black generates a conversation about the act of seeing; the 3 by 3 grid forms a cross that can be thought of as religious; even conversations regarding the infinite leads the painting's signification away from itself. I cannot propose what I imagine is the "ultimate painting," but I greatly admire Reinhardt's no-nonsense, no tolerance approach to realizing his goals.



Howell, *Orsanmichele*

I am most interested in the way Reinhardt employed black, despite being for him decorative, to contradict expectations. I have attempted to make my work function similarly, but materially. In my piece *Orsanmichele*, I figured out a

method of drawing with acrylic via a subtractive process. In my painting, I attempt to make the image look drawn, yet confuse the viewer with its actual material composition. I am interested in trying to get viewers to look closely at my artwork, as I believe Reinhardt's black paintings do. For this reason I have been working with a more grisaille color palette, although recently I have begun introducing new colors like orange and blue.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to quote a passage from Robbe-Grillet's book *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* that I really believe embodies the methodology through which I work.

"Exhibit X in any detective story gives us, paradoxically, a clear image of this situation. The evidence gathered by the inspectors – an object left at the scene of the crime, a movement captured by a witness – seem chiefly, at first, to require an explanation, to exist only in relation to their role in a context which overpowers them. And already the theories begin to take shape: the presiding magistrate attempts to establish a logical and necessary link between things; it appears that everything will be resolved in a banal bundle of causes and consequences, intentions and coincidences....

But the story begins to proliferate in a disturbing way: the witnesses contradict one another, the defendant offers several alibis, new evidence appears that had not been taken into account...And we keep going back to the recorded evidence: the exact position of a piece of furniture, the word scribbled in a message. We have the mounting sense

that nothing else is true. Though they may conceal a mystery, or betray it, these elements which make a mockery of systems have only one serious, obvious quality, which is to be there." (For a New Novel, 22).

I see my studio process as functioning similarly to a detective novel. My phenomenological interests in materiality and well as my impressionistic impulses in mark making often lead to experimentation. When I work from each piece to the next, I usually focus on one element from the previous piece which I was curious about, then make a piece that is focused around that one specific thing. I see art making as a continuous exploration of curiosities, and for that reason I reject Reinhardt's desire for an "ultimate painting." As Robbe-Grillet writes, detective novels are interesting because every time you think you start to understand something, a new clue comes in to complicate that previous understanding. I acknowledge that often times my work becomes more formally investigative and lacking in real conceptual heft, yet I think this kind of artistic approach is extremely generative, to keep working and questions about what is happening in the material, the image, concept, and so on.

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